

## CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL** held at Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Monday, 5 November 2012

### PRESENT

#### Elected Members (voting)

Cllr M A G Versallion (Chairman), Mrs A Barker, D Bowater, MRS S A Goodchild, Mrs D B Gurney, N J Sheppard and B Wells

#### Officers (voting)

Mrs E Grant – Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services  
Mrs J Ogley – Director of Social Care, Health and Housing

Apologies for Absence: Cllr N B Costin  
Cllr A L Dodwell  
Mrs H Philips

Members in Attendance: Cllr P N Aldis

Officers in Attendance: Mrs E Grant – Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services  
Ms F Mackirdy – Head of Adoption and Fostering  
Mr L Manning – Committee Services Officer  
Mrs J Ogley – Director of Social Care, Health and Housing  
Ms S Scholey – Interim Head of Service for Looked after Children, Leaving Care and Asylum

#### CPP/12/17 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held on 3 September 2012 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### CPP/12/18 **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman referred to a letter from Edward Timpson MP, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, which had been sent to the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services. The letter, copies of which were circulated at the meeting, dealt with improving outcomes for care leavers and referred to measures introduced, or to be introduced, by the Government to this end. The letter also sought a commitment for local authorities to improve their performance where this fell short of best practice and support the newly published Charter for Care Leavers.

In response the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services explained that she intended to give full consideration to the issues raised within the letter. As a part of this process she would also undertake full consultation with the Children in Care Council and other Looked After Children. She would then report to the next meeting of the Panel with a proposed response. The meeting fully concurred with this approach.

For the Panel's benefit the Interim Head of Service for Looked After Children, Leaving Care and Asylum outlined various points of interest relating to care leavers in Central Bedfordshire. The meeting first noted that the current total number of former, relevant, care leavers stood at 101. All had been allocated personal advisors and all had pathway plans. The Interim Head of Service stated that she had recently audited a small sample of the pathway plans and notable improvements had been made in their quality. There had also been input from the young people.

The Interim Head of Service next advised that, from the data she had reviewed, there were only three young people, all Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), deemed not to be in suitable accommodation. This was because they were missing and so it was not actually possible to determine the status of their accommodation. Turning to N(ational) I(ndicator) 148 the meeting noted that the cohort was 23 young people of whom 14 were recorded as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Individual details of placement groups were described.

The Interim Head of Service informed the meeting that the financial policy for care leavers was reviewed and revised in April 2012 and would be next reviewed in April 2013. The policy, which was composed in consultation with the Children in Care Council, was detailed and set out other, additional, payments which the Council might make to care leavers. The Interim Head of Service emphasised that young people were always given support by the Council in the spending of their setting up home allowance.

In response to a Member's query regarding the amount paid by the Council to enable care leavers to meet the costs of transition to independent living the Interim Head of Service stated that the care leaver's grant was £1,750. This sum was a base figure to pay for essentials and she stressed that additional payments were also made leading to a total payment of over £2,000 to each care leaver.

In response to a further query the Interim Head of Service stated that care leavers received priority treatment for social housing and received support when bidding for a property.

CPP/12/19 **Members' Interests**

There were no declarations of interest.

## CPP/12/20 **The Future Development of the Corporate Parenting Panel**

Members received a presentation by the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services on the role and remit of the Corporate Parenting Panel. The presentation set out the progress made by the Panel since Central Bedfordshire Council had begun on 1 April 2009 and the challenges which she felt the Panel faced. A diagram illustrating the relationship between the Panel and related bodies such as the Children in Care Council, Children's Trust and Executive was circulated at the meeting.

Working through her presentation the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services highlighted the question as to whether the Panel involved foster carers appropriately and expressed concern at the absence of any foster carer representation at the meeting. She queried whether this absence was the result of the Panel meetings becoming too formal. She also raised the wider question of what purpose the Panel served.

The Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services then raised a number of other issues for debate including whether there was a successful involvement of young people in the Panel and how a succession of senior officers in Children's Services each with their own views on how the Panel should work, had impacted on its success. She also referred to the lack of recognition of the role of officers in general as corporate parents, a position emphasised by the absence of training provision for officers on this role. The Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services stressed the importance of the 'Whole Council' approach in which officers from across the Council, not restricted by statutory regulation, could contribute towards improving outcomes for Looked After Children. Likewise, the Council's committees could consider the impact of their decisions on Looked After Children and take action which would support them as a 'Whole Life' approach.

The Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services referred to the testing of the Council's practice against those of other local authorities.

In response to the above full and frank discussion took place amongst the Panel and a number of observations, views and suggestions were made as follows:

- a) Meetings – the Panel's meetings were felt to be too formal and too much like committee meetings. These were contrasted with Corporate Parenting meetings held at the former Bedfordshire County Council where meetings were informal and attendees would sit in a circle, eating together;
- b) Time of meetings – Panel meetings were usually held at 11.00 a.m. when Looked After Children were at school or college and so were unable to attend. Further, today's meeting had been held on a teacher training day thus preventing foster carers from attending. Future meetings should not be held on teacher training days or school holidays. Some evening meetings, starting at 5.00 or 6.00 p.m., should be considered and a buffet tea provided;

- c) Agenda items – foster carers and Looked After Children had no opportunity to raise items at Panel meetings. They should have ‘slots’ set aside on Panel agendas where they could raise items for consideration;
- d) Representation – foster carers and Looked After Children should be encouraged to attend the Panel’s meetings. The Looked After Children attending should be varied so that a range of views was presented to reflect ages and other factors. Membership could include a young adult who was a former Looked After Child and who could bring his or her personal experience of the system to meetings;
- e) Corporate parenting role – some councillors were not aware of how important their role as corporate parents was and staff in general did not know of their role as corporate parents. Members in general should attend at least one Panel meeting a year and information for staff on their responsibilities could be included in their induction packs. Reference was made to the advocacy role undertaken by Members at the legacy authority which enabled a closer relationship to be established with Looked After Children ;
- f) Knowledge and training – during the Ofsted inspection Members felt they had insufficient training and background knowledge on the service. It was felt that members should be able to observe the officers undertaking service delivery.
- g) Comparison with other Panels – Members should visit other local authorities to observe their Corporate Parenting Panels in operation and invite representatives from those Panels to observe and comment on Central Bedfordshire’s Panel.

In conclusion the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children’s Services advised the meeting that Ofsted had no set organisational template on which Corporate Parenting Panels should be based. Instead Ofsted placed emphasis on a Panel’s positive impact and enthusiasm. She stressed that the Panel should focus on its core purpose and drive outcomes.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1 that a working group composed of Councillors Mrs A Barker, D Bowater, A L Dodwell (subject to confirmation), Mrs S A Goodchild, M A G Versallion and B Wells be formed to consider best practice having regard to Corporate Parenting meetings conducted elsewhere;**
- 2 that the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children’s Services identify those officers willing to assist the working group identified in resolution 1 above;**
- 3 that, for the sake of speed and efficiency, working group’s business be conducted by email rather than formal meeting;**

- 4 that the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services organise a trip for the working group to visit other local authorities with regard to their Corporate Parenting meetings;
- 5 that the trip referred to in resolution 3 above take place before Christmas 2012 if possible and certainly prior to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel on 4 February 2013 so that any findings can be incorporated into any associated report;
- 6 that a draft development plan be prepared by the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services for submission to the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel on 4 February 2013;
- 7 that the Committee Services Officer write to the foster carer representatives on the Corporate Parenting Panel to apologise for the November meeting of the Panel being held on a teacher training day when foster carers would not be available to attend;
- 8 that the Committee Services Officer confirm that the next meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel is not scheduled to be held during a school holiday or teacher training day;
- 9 that the Committee Services Officer ensure that the meetings of the Corporate Parenting Panel to be held in the next municipal year are not scheduled to be held during a school holiday or teacher training day;

CPP/12/21 **National Agenda - "Stolen Children"**

The Head of Adoption and Fostering informed the Panel that the Council had been notified by the British Association for Adoption & Fostering of a website called 'Stolen Children of the UK'. The Head of Adoption and Fostering advised Members of the website's content and of the organisation's policy of publishing information on individual local authority social services officers.

**NOTED**

**the oral report on the website 'Stolen Children of the UK'.**

CPP/12/22 **Recruitment of Foster Carers**

Members received a presentation by the Head of Adoption and Fostering on foster carer recruitment. The presentation set out the recruitment activity undertaken, including advertisements, events, stalls, editorials and the use of social media, the number of enquiries received and the level of successful 'conversion' of these enquiries into new foster carer appointees, the comments made by existing foster carers about their experience of fostering for the Council and, lastly, the level of allowances paid to carers.

In response to a Member's query regarding the timescale for the period between the initial enquiry by a member of the public and their approval as a new foster carer the Head of Adoption and Fostering explained that the target was 20 weeks from the time of their formal application through to approval. She stated that if this timescale was missed it was usually as a result of delays for statutory checks or personal reasons.

A Member sought clarification on the need for both the Council's Fostering Service and independent, private fostering agencies to operate. In response the Head of Adoption and Fostering explained that fostering took place in a 'mixed economy' and that the private sector was able, for example, to provide niche placements for more difficult to place children; a service which would not be cost effective for the Council to do. She also stated that a decision to be a foster carer was not simply based on the level of allowances paid by the Council or agency. Some foster carers chose, for moral reasons, to foster for the Council rather than the private sector and, further, appreciated the support offered by the Fostering Service in the form of practical advice and support groups. In response to a query the Head of Adoption and Fostering added that new foster carers were 'buddied' with experienced carers. Experienced carers, if undergoing a difficult period in their work, could in turn be 'buddied' with other experienced carers for support.

With regard to placements the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services explained that the earlier a child was taken into care the greater the chance of placing them. She added that the age of children being taken into care was drifting downward as a reflection of cultural change. In response to a Member's question as to whether there were sufficient and suitable foster carers for the range of children entering care the Head of Adoption and Fostering confirmed that there were. She added that the difficulties which arose in placing some children reflected problems experienced nationally and it was recognised that certain groups would require specialist provision.

A number of questions and suggestions followed regarding foster carer recruitment. During this point a Member queried whether otherwise suitable applicants to become foster carers were rejected because they failed to meet the relevant criteria in full, perhaps because they were smokers, and asked whether the criteria could be too strict. In response the Head of Adoption and Fostering explained that the only persons automatically excluded from becoming foster carers were those prevented from doing so by law. In the case, for example, of smokers, they could be recruited as foster carers but would be expected to smoke outside their home. Further, children aged under five years would not be placed with them due to the close contact that would be expected to occur between the foster carer and child, and nor would children with respiratory difficulties. The Head of Adoption and Fostering stressed that all applicants would be assessed on an individual basis.

Members suggested additional recruitment activities for consideration. Reference was also made to the Council's current policy of paying a £100 bonus to an existing foster carer for nominating an applicant who was, in turn, approved as a foster carer. Given the low number of carers appointed by this method it was felt that this policy should be examined to see if any

improvements could be introduced. The Head of Adoption and Fostering undertook to consult with foster carers to establish their views on this matter.

**NOTED**

**the presentation on foster carer recruitment.**

CPP/12/23 **Quarter Two Report on the Fostering Service - July to September 2012**

The Panel considered a report by the Interim Assistant Director Children's Services Operations which outlined activity in the Fostering Service during Quarter Two (July to September 2012) with comparison to previous quarters.

The Panel received updates on the following areas:

- Recruitment of foster carers
- Placements for children
- Training for foster carers
- Key events
- Key issues

With regard to the recruitment of foster carers, and in response to a Member's comments regarding the accessibility of cumulative data within the officer's report, the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services stated that, in future this data would be included as part of the relevant text of the report as well as in graphical form within an appendix to the report as it was currently provided.

**NOTED**

**the content of the Quarter Two report on the Fostering Service for the period July to September 2012.**

CPP/12/24 **Half-Year Report on the Adoption Service - April to September 2012**

The Panel considered a report by the Interim Assistant Director Children's Services Operations on activity in the Adoption Service during the first six months of 2012-13. The report updated Members on developments in the following areas:

- Recruitment of adopters
- Adoption planning and placements for children
- Special guardianship and adoption support
- Adult adoption work
- Key events
- Key issues

Under 'key issues' the Panel noted that the Department for Education had launched three consultations in relation to adoption practice. The consultations

with regard to a) contact for children where adoption was the plan and b) sibling placements had now closed. The third consultation was ongoing and sought views on a major change in the way adopters were recruited. This included a reduction in the recruitment period and the implementation of 'Fostering for Adoption', a practice where children were first placed with adopters under a fostering arrangement whilst the court decided on whether adoption should be the plan. In response the Head of Adoption and Fostering stated that, whilst the Council could reduce the element of time it required in the recruitment period, delays could also arise when the court undertook its duties and this problem would remain unresolved. She added that the Government wanted to see the total recruitment period reduced from the current eight months to no more than six, of which the Council should take no more than four months. The Head of Adoption and Fostering stated that the outstanding consultation was due to end in December and the outcome would be known early next year.

In response to a query by the Chairman the Head of Adoption and Fostering stated that, whilst other adoption bodies welcomed the Government's sentiments, it was felt that some core problems within the adoption recruitment process would remain.

In response to a query by a Member on whether the role of the Adoption Panel would change the Head of Adoption and Fostering explained that the composition of Adoption Panels was being considered but their function was likely to remain.

#### **NOTED**

**the content of the half-year report on the Adoption Service for the period April to September 2012.**

#### **CPP/12/25    Looked After Children's Health Progress Report**

The Panel considered a report by the Director of Nursing and Quality which set out the progress made in improving health outcomes for Looked After Children following the Ofsted inspection of Services for Safeguarding and Looked After Children in February and March 2012. The report, which had originally been submitted to the Shadow Health and Wellbeing Board, set out both the action taken to deal with the issues which Ofsted had required to be dealt with in the six months following its inspection and, in addition, longer term improvement planning.

In the absence of a representative from the Health Services the report was presented by the Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services.

The Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services drew Members' attention to the transfer of responsibility for the delivery of the action plan from NHS Bedfordshire and Luton to the Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group. She then referred to some areas where progress had been made but the status of outcomes remained as 'red'. The Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Children's Services explained that this was the result of the 'milestones'

used being unable to recognise partial improvements in service provision, thus preventing the outcome status from being upgraded to 'amber'.

**NOTED**

**the Looked After Children's health progress report.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 11.00 a.m. and concluded at 12.54 p.m.)